AM: You've heard Arron Banks there. I think the narrative has shifted a bit again. If – if – it was judged by the National Crime Agency that something serious had gone wrong in the funding of the Brexit referendum, what would that mean for the referendum?

JB: Well, I think it’s very difficult for me to comment on something that is very firmly a live investigation, a live criminal investigation. As a government, we are getting on with the delivery of the referendum. 17 million people voted for us to leave the EU, that is what we’re seeking to execute, to get that deal and make sure that happens.

AM: But if money had – I say again if – if money had come from abroad, from illegitimate sources, and was influential in that referendum, would that not undermine the whole validity of the referendum?

JB: Well, again, I think we need to ensure this investigation takes its course. But as I understand it, Mr Banks was not associated with the main Leave campaign, obviously the public voted for us to leave the European Union. That is what we are taking forward as a government, making sure that happens and delivering on the Brexit referendum.

AM: I’m going to ask you a bit more about Brexit in a moment. But before I do, can I ask about the very sad news that Jeremy Heywood has died of lung cancer, and of course you suffered from lung cancer and knew Jeremy Heywood well. Just reflect a little bit on his importance. He’s not the kind of person who comes and sits on these chairs or the public sees much of, but he’s a crucial figure from the Blair years all the way through to now.
JB: Jeremy was an outstanding public servant. Some would say the public servant of his generation. Heading up the Civil Service, working within the Civil Service around three decades, serving four prime ministers with absolute distinction. And I think it was the fact of his leadership, his intellect, but also his good humour and his kindness and his ability to be able to deal with some of the most complex issues of our time and how he will be so sadly and so sorely missed. And our condolences and thoughts very much go to Suzanne, his wife, his children and the rest of his family.

AM: Are we close to deal on the Brexit exit, do you think?
JB: Well, we want to get that deal, we’re obviously working hard to see that that happens. Negotiations are still very firmly continuing, and therefore we are 95 per cent of the way there in relation to the Withdrawal Agreement. Obviously still having this issue in relation to the insurance arrangements for Northern Ireland and Ireland, and that very much remains our focus and attention in getting that deal.

AM: How was it possible for the government to lose one of its most popular Ministers, Tracey Crouch, the Sports Minister, over these gambling machines? Why did you decide as a government to hang on for another six months? These are terribly addictive machines, people are killing themselves up and down the country. Tracey Crouch actually had met the mother of somebody who had killed themselves because of a gambling addiction, and yet you managed to lose her. It was complete incompetence, wasn’t it?

JB: Well, I’m obviously very sorry to see Tracey leave the government. She is an outstanding colleague, someone who’s worked very hard and very passionate about the issues that she believes in. But what I would say is that actually we were called on to introduce these arrangements prior to April 2020. We’ve
brought that forward to deliver this in October 2019, recognising that we need to do this. We need to bring these -

AM: You still delayed it for another six months. She says in her resignation letter: ‘two people will tragically take their lives every day due to gambling-related problems, and for that reason as much as any other I believe this delay is unjustifiable.’ How can she be wrong?

JB: Well, we want to see this delivered effectively for all of the good reasons that Tracey identifies. But it’s wrong to say that there’s been a delay. We had not committed to introducing on a particular day. We’d been called on to introduce it before April 2020, we are doing that, we want to see this introduced properly and effectively so that we can actually make the difference in this area.

AM: She was the Minister in charge of this, and she uses the word ‘delay’ so it ‘s quite hard to see how it wasn’t a delay. And she says, ‘from the time of the announcement to reduce the stakes and its implementation, over 1.6 billion pounds will be lost on these machines, a significant amount of money in our most deprived constituencies.’ And again, she’s right about this.

JB: Well, it’s right that we recognise the need for change. That’s what the government is doing. That’s why we’re implementing this. We want to do this right. We want to do this properly. That’s why we’re bringing this into effect next October, to respond and recognise to the need, and actually doing it speedier than some others were calling on us to do, so that we can make a difference in people’s lives in the way that we need to.

AM: You’ve got an initiative on the High Streets at the moment. Now High Streets are being undermined and hollowed out by our general enthusiasm for online shopping, as you know.
JB: The High Streets are changing.

AM: And so you see boarded up shop after boarded up shop after boarded up shop. Can government really change the look of these High Streets? What are you going to do, are you going to have to slash business rates, encourage small businesses, what are you going to do?

JB: We need to make a difference on a number of different fronts. In the budget this week we announced 675 Future High Streets Fund to innovate, to see how local councils can really support the High Street. Also bringing down business rates over the next two years for around by about a third. But it’s also about what we need to do on some of these empty vacant shops, how we can turn these over into community hubs, actually bring them back into use. The benefit actually that has for both landlords and communities, and therefore taking action on a number of different fronts, as well as getting people to live in the High Streets too, so that it’s actually creating a footfall and making our High Streets viable and positive, recognising that the digital environment is changing the way that we shop, the way that we do business, and that’s needing to respond to that clearly on all fronts.

AM: A bit of a row at the moment between the BBC and the government over budget coverage. Can I ask you directly, in terms of the poorest people in the country, the bottom ten per cent, and the richest people in the country, the top ten per cent, who is getting the most cash benefit from the budget?

JB: Well, proportionately those on the lower end have actually gained the most from this budget, in terms of lowering the thresholds over taxation. But also -

AM: And in cash terms?
JB: - increasing the actual numbers that are there in terms of, for example, the national living wage. So the benefit proportionately is very firmly at the bottom end.

AM: Proportionately. But in cash terms?

JB: I don’t think you actually measure this in cash terms.

AM: The IFS has, helpfully – the IFS, unimpeachable, not a leftwing source or anything like that, says, 'our estimate is that the poorest ten per cent of people gain £50 per annum from this budget, while the richest ten per cent gain £280 from the budget. In cash terms, the richest ten per cent do get more than the poorest ten per cent.

JB: But it’s why I come back to the point about proportionate – the different proportions in terms of where you start off. And therefore the benefit and impact of what people receive. Which is why I do make the point about how this was a budget for those on low incomes, the benefit that will provide, and actually the real support through taxation, through the national living wage, and therefore this very firmly being a budget for those on low incomes.

AM: The British people are less concerned with proportions than cash, I suspect James Brokenshire, but thank you very much indeed for talking to us.